

Greer a cool mountain hamlet

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At the end of state Highway 373, a sliver of road almost lost among the pine-covered White Mountains, there's a town where residents don't mind bears rummaging through trash cans, deer nibbling in gardens or skunks living under cabins.

Such inconveniences are cheap prices to pay for scenery, serenity and solitude, where shutting off the outside world is as easy as turning off the television.

Greer is ensconced in a small valley 8,500 feet above sea level and is marked only by a loose gathering of cabins and lodges. Local wildlife outnumbers human inhabitants by perhaps 100-1 (though odds diminish during hunting season).

Residents revel in the isolation, preferring to wake to the chittering of squirrels than the electronic bleat of an alarm clock. They'll rise as the sun emerges from behind the forested ridge, and their first breath of the day will be of cool pine-scented air.

Before long, threads of smoke will rise from chimneys to smudge the crystal-sharp horizon. Bacon, eggs and sausage will sizzle on the grills of the two cafes in town as the regulars begin to drift in.

"If I see someone I know coming in, I put in their usual orders before they even sit down," says Bernadette Palmateer, the hostess, waitress, busperson and bartender at the Greer Mountain Resort. In a town this small, you know everyone as well as what they eat.

Tourists, meanwhile, will peer out of the windows of their cabins and marvel how close nature can be to amenities such as indoor plumbing and comfortable beds.

And bears will be safely hidden in the hills, leaving behind a few ravaged trash cans as reminders of their nightly foraging.

"I tied down the lid, put a rock on top of the can, and the bear still got into it," says Bill Jaynes, owner of the Greer Mountain Resort, who discovered the lodge's trash strewn behind the kitchen. "They smell food, they're going to get into it. What can you do?"

Bears are no problem as long as they don't rip the lids off tourists, Greer's No. 1 source of income. Nearly every weekend, visitors descend on the sleepy little town, filling its rooms, restaurants and coffers.

Most full-time residents own a lodge or work in one and are happy Greer has found its niche as a backcountry getaway where tourists can hike, fish or commune with nature without having to camp.

Many visitors spend their time at one of the three reservoirs in town, each stocked with trout.

For 50 weeks a year, John Gray runs a bulldozer outside the mines of Morenci. But early in September, he was stretched out on a lawn chair on the shore of Tunnel Reservoir. He gazed into the water at the reflection of the billowy clouds that fill the horizon, keeping no more than a casual eye on the fishing poles staked to each side.

'It's the relaxing'

"It ain't the fishing, it's the relaxing," Gray says. "Nothing can beat the scenery and the fresh air up here."

Dorothy Herr was more intent on her fishing. The Litchfield Park resident has come to Greer each of the past 35 years, spending much of her visit patrolling the clear waters of the Little Colorado River that flow gently on the outskirts of town.

She dipped the fishing rod into the stream and moved the line back and forth. Feeling a slight tug, she jerked the line out of the water and grabbed the fish that wriggled on the hook. She quickly removed the hook and speared the fish on a nearby twig so it couldn't flop back into the river.

"I like to go to the fish instead of waiting for the fish come to me," Herr says. "Fishing here has always been good, but the town sure has changed. It's getting pretty big. Almost too big."

Population: 94

Some might argue with that. Greer's year-round population ranges between 84 and 103, depending on who you ask (the sign welcoming people to town puts the population at 94, but "that doesn't count two babies born just a few months ago," one resident says).

Tourists, however, can swell that number by several hundred. In the summer they come to breathe the cool mountain air. In the winter they cross-country ski across snow-blanketed slopes.

And in the fall, they come to see the changing aspen leaves that marble the forests with rich veins of gold.

Last year, Greer may have passed the point of no return. Sewers were installed and waste disposal was no longer a barrier to growth. Not everyone sees that as a sign of progress.

"This is the land of unlimited flushes," says Hank Josz, a retiree who's lived in Greer 15 years. "I hope the town doesn't think it has to grow now. This is a dead-end town on a dead-end street, and I prefer it that way."

The area was nothing more than a dead-end valley until Mormon leader Brigham Young directed followers to settle here in the late 1800s. By 1879, the Mormons had established a small farming community living off its No. 1 cash crop, potatoes.

Rooms for visitors

The tourist industry established a foothold in the 1920s when Molly Butler, who provided rooms for visitors as long as they worked for their meals, figured there were people who'd pay to stay in Greer. She was right. Soon the owner of the Molly Butler Lodge was the richest person in town, says her nephew, Jack Wiltbank.

Wiltbank, one of the few Greer natives who still lives there, says people were surprised the lodge did so well.

"Nobody figured anyone would start paying for rooms they normally got for free," Wiltbank, 70, says. "But Aunt Molly had something there. Who knew Greer would have anything to attract tourists?"

Then again, it would be years before "nature" would prove to be a precious commodity, when visitors would come only to be close to it.

And nature certainly is close, if not sometimes downright annoying. Ask Judy Cline, who owns (and lives behind) Greer's only antique store, The Quacker Barrel.

Cline and her family had always noticed a suspicious odor, but they figured it was one of those scents that "must be from outside." Late one night, however, they investigated a suspicious noise and watched silently as five large skunks emerged from underneath the store.

"What're we going to do?" she says. "That's what you get living in the country sometimes. It wouldn't be fair to chase them out of their home."

"Pretty soon someone told me we could get rid of the scent by putting out mothballs, only they didn't tell us it would only take a couple. Instead, we pulled up a few floor planks and dumped a couple of bags down there and now we can't get rid of the mothball smell."

But skunks make better neighbors than drug problems, crime and other city woes. Cline much prefers a town where a trout-filled stream (the Little Colorado) is a short walk away, and she appreciates that she can step out on her porch and listen to the wind whisper through the pines.

3 channels on TV

Cline and other residents take pleasure in Greer's simplicity. They like the fact there's only one store in town (eliminates the time-consuming chore of comparison shopping). They don't mind that their televisions only pick up three channels (actually 2 1/2 since one comes in fuzzy).

They also like being able to leave their doors unlocked when they leave their homes and cars.

"It's funny watching tourists checking their car doors to make sure they locked them," Jaynes says. "They act as if they were still in the city."

Life in Greer goes unnoticed by many people driving through the White Mountains, zipping past the small sign that marks state Highway 373.

But few residents expect that to last. Their hidden treasure probably won't remain hidden much longer.

If you go

Getting there: Take state Route 87 north to Payson and turn east on state Route 260. Follow the road past Show Low, Pinetop and Lakeside. Just past McNary, look for state Route 373 (a small sign points the way). Turn right and you'll be in Greer in a matter of minutes. For a more scenic route, drive east on U.S. 60, which will take you through the Salt River Canyon and into Show Low. Turn east on state Route 260 to state Route 373.

Weather: Fall can be chilly, so bring a sweater or jacket. Overnight temperatures typically drop into the lows 50s or 40s. Greer has had a wet summer, so be prepared for rain.

Don't miss: Several hiking trails lead into the pine forest. One of the best is the Baldy Trail, a 17-mile-loop around Mount Baldy. It starts at the south edge of town and follows the Little Colorado River before curving around the mountain. It also offers the best views of fall colors. Be careful when you're hiking because the trail is popular with riders on horseback.

Good fishing can be found at Hawley Lake, about 10 miles from Greer (go west on Highway 260 until you see the sign marking lake road). For pure relaxation, stroll among the trout ponds in the meadow behind the Greer Lodge. The ponds are connected by narrow creeks, channeling water that spills from the ponds over tiny waterfalls.